

**Sermon: Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Theme: The Message of the Cross**  
**Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

**<sup>18</sup> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.'**

**<sup>20</sup> Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.**

**<sup>26</sup> Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast before him. <sup>30</sup> It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. <sup>31</sup> Therefore, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.'**

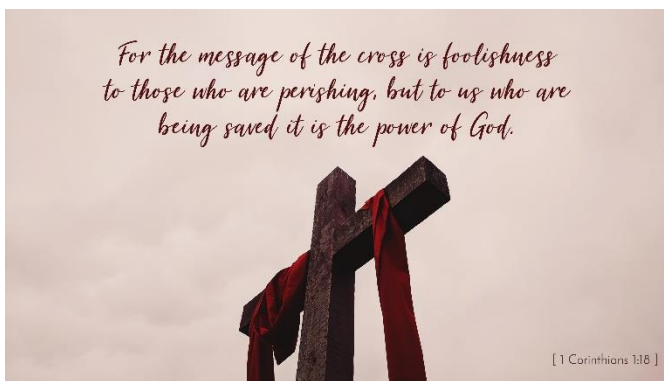
Today marks six years to the day since I was installed as your pastor by Bishop David Altus. I remember standing here on the parquetry and looking around at the congregation and feeling overwhelmed. Such a large space, so many people, each one of you with your own story. What could I bring to you that would challenge, encourage, comfort and guide you? Not my wisdom, my smarts, certainly not my inherent power or my charisma. Only this one thing: the message of the cross. As Paul says in As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2: **"I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."** Amen.

A few weeks ago, on the seventeenth of January, I celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of my ordination, which took place at the church in which I grew up, St Paul's Glenelg, in 1993. I chose these words as my ordination text, a kind of motto, of you like, for how I wanted God to lead me in my ministry. **"I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."**



These words come from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul wanted people to know what motivated him to serve as God's messenger. Actually, the most important thing wasn't Paul as the messenger, but the message God gave him, the good news of Jesus Christ, and the people to whom God sent him to proclaim it: Jews and Gentiles, in other words, everybody.

Paul commences his letter to the Corinthians in almost exactly the same way. He wants the church to know where he stands, and where they stand too. It's clear that this congregation wasn't firing on all cylinders. We heard last week about factions that had developed, fracturing their common life. So where does Paul go when the going gets tough. There's no place but the cross. We know the cross today as the universal symbol of the church. We are used to it, and we expect to see it in this building. But it's hard for us to comprehend the shock of the message of the cross.



Paul writes, "**The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.**" What exactly is its power? That God has chosen to bring new life and hope to the world by sending his Son to become a human being. At the age of 30, Jesus began his ministry, announcing, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**" He taught, healed, raised the

dead, but all of this was a prelude to his life's goal: to reconcile all people to God by offering up his life as a sacrifice for human sin. And the cross was the cruel instrument of his death.

It is impossible to overstate how shocking this whole scenario was in the world of Jesus' time. Jewish people were hoping for a powerful military Messiah, who would lead his people to freedom, where they could live as God's covenant people. And the intellectual Greeks couldn't conceive why a God would want to become a human being. They lived in the world of the mind; the body was a dirty, second-class things. The whole thing, from incarnation to cross, and resurrection too, was totally unfathomable.

Paul notes their objections, but goes ahead anyway: "**We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**" This is power that serves us in love rather than subjugate and control us for its own ends. This is not air-headed wisdom that doesn't address the practical concerns we face, but enables us to live a full, meaningful, purposeful life.



The cross of Jesus is the centre of the Christian faith. Take it away, tone down the talk about God making us right with him, God making us holy through Jesus' perfect life, God redeeming with the price of Jesus' life, and you have nothing left but a hollow shell. No power of God, no wisdom, no life.

The world today knows the symbol of the cross. But it's sad to say that people don't know its wisdom or its power. In a world of influencers telling us about the secret of living our best life, the cross smacks us between the eyes. We can try all kinds of external measures. We can seek to change our lifestyles. But none of this can deal with the cardinal issue-the breakdown of our relationship God, the sin that sticks like chewing gum to carpet, the collateral damage to our relationships with other people and our world, and of course, the oldest, worst enemy-death. The cross is God's power. A strange, suffering, painful power that changes the world. Forgiveness, won by Jesus through the cross, is the breath of new life, the healing of old hurts, the change-bringer in our lives and relationships.

Just before Christmas last year, Greg Sheridan wrote an article in the Weekend Australian specifically about 1 Corinthians. It was entitled "Christianity's weird success." Sheridan's conviction is that in a world that is increasingly returning to a kind of paganism, seen in the **"death of an underlying commitment to marriage and the sanctity of life,"** the time is ripe for conversion. Just like the world Paul was addressing in 1 Corinthians. Sheridan's conviction is that the church itself must stay convicted about the power and wisdom of the cross.

He writes, **"Paul's message is repentance, redemption and resurrection, that the old world is over because Jesus has come with his message of repentance and love, and he has conquered death. Jesus has inaugurated a new way of living, in which human beings are elevated to their true destiny."**



This won't be easy. As the people of Corinth thought this strange sect of Christ followers weird, so they think of the church today. Sheridan writes, **"Even more grotesque, in the view of Corinthians, of Greeks and Romans alike, was the Christian view of power. They worshipped a crucified Jew. This tiny, uninfluential sect thought the inverted power of the cross more important than empire and city."** This, of course is the scandal and offense of the cross. Still scandalous, still offensive, still revolutionary, still life changing today. Still the heart of all we are and say and do. Amen.

Peace in Christ

Pastor Andrew Brook